

**THE NIGERIA – USA YOUTH EXCHANGE AND STUDY
PROGRAM “THE JOURNEY SO FAR” BEING A PAPER
PRESENTED BY DR SAIDU YAKUBU, THE COUNTRY DIRECTOR
OF IRIS PROGRAMS IN NIGERIA DURING THE PRE-
DEPARTURE ORIENTATION FOR YES STUDENTS HELD IN
ABUJA ON THURSDAY JULY 19 2007.**

The acting counselor for public affairs,
U.S embassy Abuja,
Distinguished staff of the U.S embassy,
The coordinators of the YES program from various states,
Distinguished members of the press,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning. It is my great pleasure and honour to give a brief remark on the Nigeria – USA Youth Exchange and Study program, “The journey so far”.

The Nigeria – USA Youth Exchange and Study Program started in Kaduna and Sokoto States in 2003 as a pilot project that gives opportunity to less privileged secondary school students in SS1 class to travel to the U.S to attend an equivalent of SS2 class in the Iowa high schools and come back to Nigeria to complete SS3 class. The program which is being coordinated by the Iowa Resource for International Service (IRIS Inc.) is designed in this way so that returning students will have the opportunity to share their experiences with other colleagues that have not been able to travel.

Selection of students is based on merit. IRIS’s local organizers, the Peace and Development Initiative work closely with the various States Ministries of Education and school principals to invite the best 4 students from participating schools to a selection interview which comprises of both written and verbal assessment. The students that qualify are then prepared for the U.S trip by undertaking lessons in English language, Medical examinations, Vaccination exercises, Orientation on what to expect in America and Visa processing.

The program is presently taking place in five States which are Taraba, Plateau, Bauchi, Sokoto and Kaduna States.

Furthermore, the U.S Department of State has given IRIS approval to increase the number of participating students from 20 to 30 beginning this year. So far Nigeria has 76 students alumni of the program spread across our various operational States and an additional 9 YES Teachers who had at one time or the other accompanied the students to the U.S or traveled back home with them.

Since the first batch of students returned home in 2004, the YES program and the alumni in Nigeria have recorded many achievements and successes some of which are:

1. Increased ability by the students to use the computer and access the internet for educational materials.
2. Formation of peace clubs in participating schools.
3. Improvement in written and spoken English

4. Improvement in student's academic standing. Most of those that have written their WAEC/NECO have passed and have been admitted into schools of higher learning.
5. Two of the YES teachers have been promoted to high school principals
6. Increased willingness to participate in selfless/voluntary community service.
7. Won the 2006 Disney-Minnie grant for voluntary community service
8. Skills in conflict resolution and leadership. One of the alumni was nominated as State Alumni of the month of February 2006 by U.S Department of State for his outstanding leadership qualities.
9. Returning students have developed friendship with Americans and now appreciate the American values and have positive change and perception of America/Americans.
10. Two of the YES alumni are currently studying in the U.S and more are likely to gain opportunity in the future
11. Reach out to schools for special students and their involvement in alumni activities.
12. Formation of YES alumni learning centers in various States with donated computers from the U.S and the U.S embassy Abuja.

Of course, before we recorded these successes, we have had to overcome challenges most especially from the Islamic clerics who felt that there was a hidden agenda in the program. With continuous education of various stakeholders and media activities to explain the program to the general populace, we were able to overcome this.

The prospect of the YES program in Nigeria is very good because various stakeholders have now realized that there is no hidden agenda in the program. With increase in awareness of the public on the aims and objectives of the YES program and the benefits been seen, more and more parents and schools wants to participate in the program. The various State Governments are increasingly willing to support the program in taking the responsibility for students' in-country expenses.

The friendship, better understanding and cooperation being built between Nigerians and Americans have started opening other doors of possible collaboration. Kaduna and Iowa State have started exploring the possibility of a sister state relationship. The past Governor of Kaduna State led a Government delegation last January to witness the Inauguration of Iowa's new Governor

Finally, I will like to express our appreciation and gratitude to the U.S Department of State for approving the YES program for Nigeria. Our thanks also go to various U.S embassy staff in Abuja and Lagos for ensuring the success of the program in Nigeria. We are also highly indebted to IRIS and its staff, the various State Governments, participating Schools, Students, Parents, members of the Peace and Development Initiative, the Media organizations and host of others not mentioned here for their continuous encouragement and support.

Thank you all for listening and God bless.